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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000745

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TAGS: [IS](#) [LE](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: MGLE01: ARMENIAN CHURCH PATRIARCH'S VIEWS ON
LEBANON'S POLITICAL SITUATION

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b).

SUMMARY

1. (C) The patriarch of the Armenian church in Lebanon, Catholicos Aram I, believes the political situation has improved significantly in the past week due to the opening of the national dialogue. He concurred with his Maronite counterpart, Patriarch Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir, that Lahoud has become a serious liability and must resign, but he also criticized Sfeir for passivity on the issue. He urged the U.S., as well as France and the EU, to continue their support and advice to the national dialogue. The cleric disapproved of Michel Aoun's recent "blessing" of Hizballah, because that only gave Hizballah greater political leverage and indirectly encouraged Iranian influence in Lebanon's affairs. He felt it was important to preserve Lebanon's uniqueness in the Arab world (i.e., its mixture of Armenian, Maronite, Druse and Muslim influences) because this characteristic could assist in the expansion of political liberalism in the region. End summary.

2. (C) The patriarch of the small but influential Armenian church received the Ambassador and poloff on March 8 at his office in Antelias, north of Beirut. The patriarch is not only the leader of the Armenian church in Lebanon, but also exercises ecclesiastical authority over the far more numerous members of the Armenian diaspora. Being outside Lebanon's sectarian mainstream, his views on the political situation are more objective than those who are deeply engaged in political maneuvers.

3. (C) Catholicos Aram I stated his conviction that the national dialogue conference currently taking place in Beirut was "changing the psychology" of politics in Lebanon and had defused much of the tension that had been building since the political violence of February 5 and the large pro-reform rally of February 14. The fact that all the principal political factions were now gathered in one room, discussing the international tribunal, relations with Syria, and the implications of UNSCR 1559, was no small achievement.

4. (C) That being said, the leader of the Armenian church believes that with regard to UNSCR 1559, the dialogue conference should limit itself to resolving the issue of the presidency. He maintained that trying to address all 1559 issues -- in particular, the arms of the Palestinian and Hizballah militias -- was attempting too much, as none were likely to be resolved, especially because regional complications affected militia disarmament. The patriarch was convinced that, despite the difficulties involved, a solution to the discredited Lahoud presidency was possible and worth a focused effort.

"LAHOUD IS A HOPELESS CASE"

15. (C) Aram insisted he had told Lahoud to leave office on March 14, 2005 and he regrets not having been more forceful. But now he felt the Lahoud presidency had become untenable -- for the Christian community and the country. Aram said that Lahoud was now only serving the Syrian regime and its interests -- and had become a "hopeless case." Additionally, Lahoud's continued occupancy of the office was allowing the Sunni-led government to usurp executive power that constitutionally belonged to the president (always a Maronite under the country's confessional system). Like many other Christian political leaders, Aram said that before the months remaining in Lahoud's term were completed, the institution of the presidency would in effect cease to exist, thereby removing a key element in Lebanon's system of confessional balance.

16. (C) He argued, therefore, that the most important goal of the dialogue must be an agreement to change the president. He understood this was a Lebanese decision, but he urged the U.S. and France to "facilitate, challenge, and support" the participants in the dialogue. Aram suggested that even Saudi Arabia and Egypt could provide a beneficial influence to the conferees, as long as it was done discreetly and in concert.

MARONITE RESPONSIBILITY

17. (C) Even with international support, Aram conceded it was up to the country's Christian community to put forth one or more names for the presidency. Without this act of

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political bravery and commitment, Lebanon's other communities could not be blamed for staying with the status quo. At this point, the patriarch criticized his religious counterpart, Nasrallah Sfeir, for fecklessness and lack of leadership. Aram said he clearly understood the need for the Maronite leader not to select specific names, but he insisted Sfeir should be leading and encouraging his community's political leaders to cease their incessant maneuvering and give the dialogue's other members "two or three names" that could be discussed and the consequences analyzed. Aram argued that not even the arrogant Aoun could argue with this path. The Armenian religious leader emphasized that while the next president had to be an "authentic" Christian (i.e., not chosen by Saad Hariri and Walid Jumblatt), he had to be acceptable to the entire country, as otherwise, "we'll be back in the same dead end we are now."

18. (C) While not declaring a candidate, because he said it was not his right, Aram commented that an Aoun presidency would be fraught with tension, primarily because he could never work with Jumblatt, and would have an uneasy relationship with Saad Hariri. He also criticized the new "alliance" between Aoun and Nasrallah, saying that the former general had unnecessarily given considerable leverage to Hizballah, while receiving few concrete assurances in return. According to the Armenian patriarch, even though an Aoun presidency would save the institution and restore a balance of executive authority, it would be a stressful period. Aram expressed his hope that a more "inclusive" candidate could be found, who would preserve the liberal character of the country, which in turn would have a long-term beneficial effect on the region.

FELTMAN